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MITIGATING MEDIA IMPACT IN
MILITARY OPERATIONS OTHER THAN WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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    The United States military has endured a dynamic history with the media over the course of American history. Although both institutions share the common goal of preserving freedom, a never-ending clash exists between the media-claimed right to free access and the military responsibility to control its operations. The transition of military activities from traditional war fighting to conducting military operations other than war (MOOTW) has presented several challenges to today's operational commander.

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"Every senior leader must personally set the example by taking a proactive rather than reactive approach to dealing with the media."

- General Dennis J. Reimer
U.S. Army Chief of Staff[1]

Throughout American military history, the news media have played an ever-increasing role in their Founding Fathers-appointed function to serve as the fourth estate of government: Guardians of democracy and defenders of public interest. The mass media represent one of the most powerful forces of public influence in peacetime and war, and provide a bond that ties together the Clausewitzian trinity aspects of people, the commander and his army, and the government.[2] More recently, with evolving media technology, the operational commander has been forced to deal with media influence on the attainment of mission objectives. These two institutions have repeatedly found themselves at odds, inevitably clashing over the issue of media access versus military control. Journalists seek a degree of freedom that is often viewed by the military as incompatible with effective operations. The unique characteristic in this often-tense relationship is based on the fact that both institutions share an ultimate goal—the preservation of American freedoms.

The past ten years have shown the United States military predominately involved in military operations other than war (MOOTW). With no apparent Cold War-like threat currently facing our nation, it is likely that most future military operations will fall in the realm of MOOTW. The influence of media reporting may ultimately be a principle factor in the success or failure of MOOTW, and the *Joint Task Force Commander's Handbook for Peace Operations* states in bold print that "the media may be of more importance to the military in MOOTW than war."[3] News media presence in the area of these operations, combined with their technology-enhanced capability to broadcast real-time information to a

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worldwide audience, has the potential to directly impact the mission of the operational commander.

The overarching argument of this paper centers on the proposal that the operational commander of MOOTW must establish a positive relationship with the news media to ensure their coverage does not adversely affect the attainment of his operational objectives. To succeed, the commander must take full advantage of existing tools developed to confront this challenge, and must incorporate a plan at the earliest possible stage of the operation. Similar to the Principles of War, MOOTW encompass several principles that, due to their unique nature and political constraints, are vulnerable to the impact of media reporting.[4] The principles of MOOTW most likely to be influenced by the media—objective, security, unity of effort, and legitimacy—will be addressed. Additionally, new information and recommendations should be offered to future commanders of MOOTW.

A brief historical perspective of military-media relations will be presented, followed by an analysis of each institution's perception of the other. Although a great deal of attention has been dedicated to the subject of military-media relations, much of the existing military doctrine requires updating to reflect more current and applicable MOOTW case studies. Lessons learned from recent U.S. military operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, specifically those originating from Task Force Eagle, should be incorporated into applicable service and joint publications. Several of these lessons will be highlighted in this study. Examples of the military's handling of the media in recent MOOTW will prove commanders can successfully work with the media to overcome potentially damaging affects of negative press, specifically in reference to the above-mentioned MOOTW principles. Finally, recommendations for enhancing the operational commander's ability to work with the media will be introduced.

Historical Perspective

It is necessary to briefly examine the history of military-media relations in order to show how these two institutions arrived at their current state. Conflicts between the military and the news media date back to the Revolutionary War, where colonial printers abusing their powers found themselves censored, harassed, bullied, and, in some cases, tarred and feathered.[5] There was a degree of cooperation from newspapers as they published orders and proclamations. Since there were no reporters in the field, newspapers obtained their war news from other publications, official proclamations and letters from eyewitnesses. George Washington feared New York newspapers were undermining the war effort against England when he wrote, "It is much to be wished that our printers were more discreet in many of their publications. We see in almost every paper proclamations or accounts transmitted by the enemy of an injurious nature."[6]

The War of 1812 produced America's first documented war correspondent, Kentuckian James M. Bradford. This editor of the *Orleans Gazette* enlisted in General Andrew Jackson's army and wrote letters home to his newspaper describing military operations. Since his dispatches arrived too late to be of any use to the enemy, there was no need for security review or censorship.[7]

The Mexican War brought new technology and innovation to the news media in the form of the telegraph and pony express, and "real-time" reporting first emerged during the Civil War. The Civil War also saw the creation of the Associated Press, and journalists faced court-martial by the War Department if they disclosed sensitive information. This threat was mostly ignored by newspapers, which frequently published orders of battle and other military information of use to the enemy. General William Tecumseh Sherman abhorred the press for

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their careless disregard for operational security, and so were born the tensions that exist today between the aims of journalists and the aims of soldiers. This inevitable friction was illustrated in each new conflict after the Civil War: "In the Spanish-American War, in World Wars I and II, in Korea and Vietnam, the tension continually reasserted itself, producing resentment and animosity between soldiers and representatives of the fourth estate."[8]

The legacy of the uncensored press in Vietnam left a bad taste in the mouths of many in the military who attribute the negative outcome of that war directly to the press coverage. These negative feelings carried over into Operation Desert Storm, as many junior officers from the Vietnam War became the senior officers in the Gulf War. Even though the Persian Gulf coverage was the most comprehensive in history, news-organization leaders voiced strong criticism of the military's treatment of the media.[9] Their confinement to escorted pools, coupled with hush orders placed on soldiers without an escort officer present, did not sit well with the media. As a result, a push for drastic change occurred following the end of the war. The emergence of embedded media shadowing military personnel in recent MOOTW has produced a change that, once the growing pains associated with establishing better military-media relations are overcome, can benefit both institutions.

Media Perceptions

The transformation of military-media relations in MOOTW reveals that older points of contention such as censorship, access to soldiers and the theater of operations, and the transmission of news back to the United States, have been rendered obsolete or irrelevant.[10] In a December 2000 roundtable discussion of military-media relations attended by this writer, a military correspondent for a leading, statewide newspaper commented that it was

"easier to access foreign military and political leaders engaged in conflict with the United States than to hurdle a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida."[11]

Doctor Charles C. Moskos, Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University, believes

> "The press, though often portrayed as cynical, have a high regard for their vocation. Freedom of the press is one of the most highly valued of our country's freedoms and a necessary element of an enlightened citizenry. The media tend to view military officials as doing what they can to avoid coverage of anything that will portray the armed forces in a bad light."[12]

The fact that fewer and fewer of today's journalists have had military experience is a source for potential disconnects in military-media relations. Alex S. Jones, a journalist with prior service in the United States Navy, wrote, "Firsthand knowledge of the military is no longer something that most Americans, including journalists, have in common, and ignorance on the subject has a cost. The military is increasingly a world apart and, hence, a target for suspicion, conspiracy theory, and fundamental misunderstanding."[13] Some reporters who frequently cover military stories express frustration and dissatisfaction over their perceptions of military behavior. Patrick Pexton, a reporter for *Navy Times*, wrote:

> "The armed services have some of the most dedicated, bravest, hardest working men and women in the world, yet their leaders are often duplicitous, devious, dishonorable and dumb. The military is also immature. Any other community of half a million souls understands that its citizens sometimes make mistakes. The military refuses to acknowledge it and insists they're perfect. Grow up."[14]

A study of military-media relations conducted by journalist Frank Aukofer and retired Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence found 74% of surveyed media members in agreement that few media personnel are knowledgeable about national defense. Less than half of the same group believed military personnel are honest when dealing with the news media, while

73% believed news media should be free to visit any place they choose within the war zone. Nearly the entire group, 98%, agreed that the military maintained secrecy often or sometimes because they did not trust the news media to report fairly. This serves as a strong indicator that media access and military security are inherently at odds with each other.[15]

Military Perceptions

As previously mentioned, the sour taste left in the mouth of the military after media coverage in the Vietnam War has not completely diminished. When it comes to granting media interviews, the perception is very real that military members have more to lose than journalists, whether such a loss is in the form of credibility or in the premature termination of one's career. The plight of former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Michael Dugan, after being fired following his interview with reporters regarding military plans in the Persian Gulf should war break out, remains fresh in the minds of senior as well as junior officers.[16] Verbal mistakes made to the press can be costly to senior members of any organization, but where else, other than the military, are the consequences so drastic and so final?

Doctor Charles Moskos believes conflicts between the military and the media in the realm of MOOTW will persist, and will not be settled in ways fully satisfactory to either side. He wrote, "The military sees itself as imbued with a noble calling, preferably in defense of national interests. The military tends to view the media as driven by market pressures and the self-aggrandizement of journalists."[17] For these reasons, it is obvious that the military in MOOTW is apprehensive of the media. On the December 10, 1995 *CBS Evening News*, Dan Rather asked an Army commander in Bosnia, "What is your greatest fear?" The commander replied, "Saying the wrong thing to the media."[18] A 1998 *Newsweek* survey

conducted by Laura Miller indicated that 58% of American soldiers stationed in Bosnia believed the news media gets in the way of society solving problems. When compared to the 71% of the American public who indicated this same view in 1994, one must acknowledge that there is no civilian-military gap.[19]

The historical perspectives introduced earlier, combined with the media and military perspectives presented above, validate the crucial necessity to address methods for improving the relationship of these two important American institutions. A summary of how military-media relations have transformed over time is presented in the table below. The displayed trends reveal distinct patterns reflected over three significant periods in this ongoing relationship: the pre-Vietnam War period, characterized by World War II and the Korean War; the post-Vietnam era, represented by military actions in Grenada, Panama, and the Gulf War; and modern MOOTW, typified by operations in Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, and Bosnia.

Trends in Military-Media Relations[20]

Military-Media Variable	Pre-Vietnam	Post-Vietnam	MOOTW
Attitude of military toward press	Friendly	Hostile	Apprehensive
Attitude of press toward military	Friendly	Skeptical	Distant
Access to military	Part of unit	Pools	Intermittent
Military control of media	High	Medium	Low
Focus on non-military entities, e.g. NGOs, inter-agencies, DoD and contract civilians	Low	Medium	High
Media perception of military relationship	Incorporated	Manipulated	Courted
Media reliance on military for communications technology	Totally	Partially	Independent
When the story ends	Shooting stops	Troops go home	Media go home

The noticeable trend in the above table highlights the increased freedom of action afforded the media in MOOTW since the post-Vietnam era. Much of this has to do with the demise of the media pool system, which will be discussed later, and the advent of new media technology. The military exercises less control over media personnel in the theater of operations due to advancements in the areas of miniaturization of media equipment and mobile transmission equipment. These innovations offer reporters the benefit of instantaneous communications with their editorial staffs back home, with little or no reliance on military assistance. The other noteworthy trend centers on the attitude progression between the military and the media from the post-Vietnam to the MOOTW period. Although "apprehensive" and "distant" are improvements over "hostile" and "skeptical," these descriptive terms leave much to be desired in the cultivation of smooth relations.

Media Impact on MOOTW

"The U.S. commander must understand how to deal with the media and the important implications of media coverage."
> - General Anthony Zinni
> United States Marine Corps[21]

Naval War College Professor J. D. Waghelstein described MOOTW as a "smaller [than war] canvas for the operational art."[22] The complications accompanying this small "canvas" of MOOTW are enormous, and include a wide range of challenges for U.S. military forces. Among these challenges cluttering up the "canvas" are unfamiliar regions, multiple agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO), private volunteer organizations (PVO), humanitarian concerns, coalition activities, and of course, swarms of media. The fact that MOOTW are more politically constrained at every level due to the overriding goal to prevent, preempt, or limit potential hostilities, makes these operations highly susceptible to

the impact of the mass media. As a result, MOOTW normally have more restrictive rules of engagement (ROE) than war, creating tough demands on the operational commander and his troops.[23]

Another unique MOOTW factor for the operational commander to consider is the fact that the media are usually present in the area of operations (AO) well prior to the arrival of military forces. Associated Press foreign correspondent, Maud Beelman, points out that a core of media already present in the theater may be regional specialists. Besides speaking the language, they will "know the lay of the land, the history, as well as the ins and outs of the conflict, and the key players." She adds, "This media will have little patience or understanding for military officers who...make basic factual errors, who cannot pronounce the names of the players or the towns involved, or who otherwise show they don't have a firm grasp of the problems that brought them there. This damages credibility."[24]

The *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* elaborates on six specific principles of MOOTW delineated by the *Doctrine For Joint Operations*, required for full consideration by joint force commanders (JFC): security, legitimacy, unity of effort, restraint, perseverance, and objective.[25] The principles of security, legitimacy, unity of effort, and objective are the most vulnerable to media influence on the operation, and should be given special attention by the JFC when dealing with the press. Case studies of recent MOOTW can better prepare commanders of future operations to mitigate the risk of media impact on these principles.

Security: The media have more access to today's MOOTW than in any other military operations in history. As previously mentioned, the press are often on scene in the AO prior to the arrival of military forces. Their real-time reporting capabilities combined

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with worldwide reach pose a potential impact on the principle of security that must be given the highest priority by the operational commander. Advance planning must take into account the real possibility that media personnel already on scene in the AO could jeopardize an operation. This possibility was realized through the military's fear that illumination from television cameras would spoil any element of surprise, and even make paratroopers easy targets in the planned night airborne assault on Port au Prince, Haiti in October 1994.[26] Given a similar situation, future commanders will need to consider additional operational options that might be less efficient, but more secure, in light of the media presence.

In the event the military is afforded the opportunity to arrive in the MOOTW AO prior to the media, the media pool system should be initially implemented for security reasons. Department of Defense (DoD) policy mandates making timely and accurate information available so that the public, Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. In turn, DoD has issued guidelines for coverage of combat operations. These guidelines prescribe pools as appropriate in certain situations, although they should not be used as standard procedures, and should be disbanded at the earliest opportunity—within 24 to 36 hours when possible.[27] In addition, DoD requires journalists to be credentialed and to abide by a clear set of military security ground rules, which, if violated, can result in the expulsion of the offender from the AO.

Legitimacy: "Media reporting influences public opinion, which may affect the perceived legitimacy of an operation and ultimately influence the success or failure of the operation."[28] The critical nature of the legitimacy principle, along with its vulnerability to media reporting, cannot be under-appreciated by a JFC. Once legitimacy has been

compromised, the operation will collapse either because of the loss of indigenous support, coalition and international support, and/or the domestic support necessary to sustain the mission. Due to the nature of MOOTW, legitimacy should be treated like the center of gravity for U.S. and coalition forces operating in theater.[29]

Embedded media became the system of preference for media personnel as well as many military leaders once operations in Bosnia commenced. Task Force Eagle (TFE), commanded by Major General William Nash, welcomed 24 media organizations as embedded members of 15 different units in the AO. The rationale was to foster familiarity between the journalists and the military units, which would lead to a more positive media attitude and an appreciation of the military mission and security requirements. Ideally, embedded media will enhance the legitimacy, security, and accomplishment of mission objectives in MOOTW. General Nash's handling of the embedded media serves as a model example for future commanders of MOOTW.

Even in the most ideal situations, legitimacy can be threatened at the hands of the media before a commander has a chance to realize what happened. Tom Ricks of the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Colonel Gregory Fontenot, commander of the first American Brigade to enter Bosnia, warning two black American soldiers to be wary of racist Croats. Additionally, Colonel Fontenot's vocalized doubts that the U.S. military presence in Bosnia would be over in 12 months, as specified by the Clinton administration, also appeared in the Ricks article. Colonel Fontenot soon found himself being criticized publicly by an unnamed White House official in a national newspaper before any kind of due process or investigation took place. The consequences of this incident not only threatened Colonel Fontenot's career, but the legitimacy of the operation and unit morale were also at risk. It also put a halt to

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military members talking openly to reporters.[30] The incident led to "the Ricks Rule," which specified that all military conversations with reporters were to be considered off the record unless otherwise stated.

Unity of Effort: This principle of MOOTW can be protected from negative media impact by a proactive approach from the operational commander. As General Nash did in TFE, future commanders of MOOTW must set up a solid internal information program through the PAO. This action will ensure that all levels of command can speak to the media with one voice. Through General Nash's leadership, a well-organized Coalition Press Information Center (CPIC) was established for TFE to disseminate the commander's guidance and philosophies to subordinate commanders via e-mail down to the company-level commander to prepare him for interactions with the media.[31] Besides communicating the consistent JTF message to lower echelons, the CPIC provided the important services of providing timely information to the media and tracking their activities.

With the vast number of media personnel roaming freely throughout the AO, the likelihood of conflicting military accounts of operations getting out to the public must be reduced to the extent possible. The CPIC was charged with the bulk of this unity of effort-preserving responsibility. The CPIC also fulfilled another critical role in TFE: If journalists violated any of the media ground rules, the CPIC would report the incident to the commander for action. TFE utilized the CPIC as a platform for information operations (IO) directed at releasing material consistent with the principle of unity of effort to the international and local audiences.[32] Another technique implemented to fend off potential negative media impact on the unity of effort in TFE was the weekly coalition press conference. This was a valuable and effective method for putting out the desired messages from TFE leadership to the

American public as well as the local population, and it served as an excellent means of countering Serbian propaganda.

Objective: Because MOOTW are extremely sensitive to political considerations, the media reporting associated with these operations has a very real potential to impact the specified military objectives. The media drive public opinion, which in turn drives political decision-making. The next stop in this chain of events is the modification of military objectives. By fostering an effective relationship with the media in the field, the operational commander can reduce the probability of reacting to new objectives established by the political master. The consequences of having to shift operational military objectives in the midst of MOOTW can prove detrimental to the legitimacy, unity of effort, and the security of assigned U.S. military forces. The impact of global network news beaming live military action into millions of homes increases a commander's odds of having to face this problem.

One way for a JFC to minimize the possibility of the media impacting operational objectives is to work with them on a regular basis, as Major General Nash did in Bosnia. Speaking about his TFE experiences to a military-media conference charged with improving the relationship between the two organizations, the retired former JFC illustrated how he achieved the level of success all future commanders should seek in MOOTW: "Embedded media is a good thing. We can learn from reporters who are experts on the area. We get feedback on how we're doing on our objectives." He added a few caveats for commanders: "We must engage the media before we need them. Honesty is a good policy. When you get a bad story, read it. And, last but not least, Dan Rather is not in the chain of command."[33]

General Nash deserves a lot of credit for his handling of the embedded media in Bosnia. The reporter assigned to shadow him was none other than Rick Atkinson of the

Washington Post—the same reporter who interviewed General Michael Dugan prior to his dismissal. General Nash was acutely aware that many of the assigned media members were much more knowledgeable about Bosnia than any of his military folks, and he had a plan for how he wanted to use their expertise. His first objective was to gain and maintain the support of the American public without regard to the political decision to intervene in Bosnia. His second objective was to use the power of the media to help influence the former warring factions to comply with the terms of the Dayton Peace Accord. A third objective involved helping the soldiers of TFE to feel good about their work.[34]

Keeping the media focused on the positive aspects of accomplishing mission objectives is a challenge, especially when it involves "non-glamorous" operations. The media would much prefer to report stories involving the inadvertent firing of missiles by an Apache helicopter in Hungary rather than the construction of pontoon bridges over the Sava River. Most of the bridges over the Sava had been destroyed during the three-year war, and those that remained could not accommodate the U.S. Army's tanks and other heavy equipment. Heroic efforts of 650 engineers battling two weeks of flooding and extremely muddy conditions caused by heavy rains eventually won out in the battle for good press.[35] The persistence of operational commanders in the quest to present media members with positive stories related to mission accomplishment is a critical element in the preservation of military objectives. The importance of building relationships and trust, combined with enforcement of the Ricks Rule, can open up new avenues for journalists. Some were fortunate enough to accompany commanders to high-level meetings in the AO. These activities lead to a better media comprehension of the military's challenges and a greater mutual sensitivity for each other's mission.

Additional Recommendations and Conclusions

Major General Nash's accomplishments with the embedded media during operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina should be studied and applied by future commanders of MOOTW. He was prepared in advance to interact in a positive way with the media in order to enlist their help in accomplishing his objectives. By providing complete, accurate, and timely information, General Nash was able to achieve a balanced, fair and credible presentation of information to the American public. His effective integration of public affairs into the decision-making process allowed him to mitigate any potential impact by the media on the vulnerable principles of MOOTW—security, legitimacy, unity of effort, and objective.

The identified shortage of media personnel possessing prior military experience presents what many perceive to be a major problem for both the media and the military. One viable suggestion for dealing with this problem comes from Major John "Doc" Church, a U.S. Marine Corps Reservist who instructs the elective course, "The Media and The Military," at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island: Media organizations should seek to educate their military correspondents by sponsoring their attendance to Professional Military Education Senior Service Schools.[36] The military has incorporated media training at the various Intermediate and Senior Service Schools in order to equip officers with the ability to make better decisions in the future when working with members of the media. To date, media organizations have rarely taken advantage of this level of military education available to them, although the Associated Press sent Pentagon correspondent Suzanne Schafer through the National Defense University in 1995. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon recognized her accomplishment in a press conference by commenting that she was "by far the best-educated Defense reporter ever to be in this room."[37]

There has been a large volume of military instructions for working with the media in recent years. Most of this information is scattered throughout a myriad of joint and service publications. The consolidation of the most pertinent aspects of this information effectively incorporated into one or two primary publications, such as the *Doctrine for Joint Operations* and *The Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*, would provide a stronger, centralized focus for military members. In addition to the consolidation of this information, updates should be made to reflect the most applicable lessons learned from the most recent MOOTW. Adding media relations as a seventh principle of MOOTW would provide a much-needed update to the list, and would be justified in light of the current and future high level of importance demanded by military-media relations. The acronym representing the principles of MOOTW, "SLURPO," should be modified to "SLURPOM" to reflect this change. It is definitely time for media relations to be recognized in its proper light.

To combat the implications of modern media technology allowing reporters to file their stories free of any checks and balances imposed by the military, the operational commander should consider the use of the Internet in all MOOTW. By setting up official websites like the TFE homepage, http://www.tfeagle.army.mil/default2.asp, commanders can ensure their intended and updated message is delivered to the American public as well as military members not deployed to the AO. Internet growth is phenomenal, and it is clear that the Internet is going to have a growing impact on military and media operations. Since the Internet is not limited by geographical, spatial, or political boundaries, media organizations operating websites can acquire news from anyone in possession of a computer. The potential for propaganda and disinformation from America's enemies is unlimited. With this in mind, the military must be prepared to utilize the Internet to circumvent the media.

Since our nation's beginning, the media and the military have been engaged in a highly visible and dynamic relationship. Every major military conflict from the Revolutionary War through the recent operation in Kosovo has seen these two organizations serving the American public in their distinct manners. History has documented the ups and downs of this association as both institutions sought high ground in a continuous battle of competing ideologies. The military defends the public while the fourth estate defends public interest. The fact is that each relies on the other to achieve success, and the American public deserves the in-depth access it receives from the coverage of military operations.

The emergence of MOOTW as the dominant role for the U.S. military has generated a significant change in the military-media relationship. The trend of journalistic freedom in the AO has been surprisingly correlated to the trend of increased military tolerance of media correspondents. The politically constraining environment the military often finds itself in today is much more dependent on media reporting as a determining factor for success or failure of the operation than in the past. This condition puts additional pressure on the operational commander to establish a positive relationship with the media.

The requirement to succeed forces the commander to utilize every means available, including advance planning for media operations, in order to mitigate the risk of the news media adversely impacting mission accomplishment. An understanding of the history that cultivated the present relationship, paired with a mandatory in-depth awareness of mutual perceptions between the military and the media will serve the commander well in this task. Reducing the vulnerabilities of the principles of MOOTW to media endangerment will be a common priority of future operational commanders. Finally, the ability to apply military-media lessons learned from the most recent MOOTW will greatly benefit all future leaders.

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[33] Ethiel, *The Military and the Media: Facing the Future*, 88.

[34] Ibid., 82-83.

[35] Ibid., 58.

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